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Sheep in a Grotto

Laken D. Brooks
Emory and Henry College

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The candles flicker upon my face and illuminate the shiny frosting of the cake. My parents' smiles are equally as bright as they sing to me; sure, it's another birthday, but this one is special. I am thirteen: a woman. The idea is foreign to me...what is a woman, anyway? Images of native Nepali matrons flash in my mind, modest against the red-lipped and witty American ladies I have come to admire. The questions flee for a moment, chased away by my parents' urgings to "make a wish and blow out the birthday candles." I close my eyes and, although I believe that a woman must be too old to believe in wishes, I comply.

I just want to be the best woman I can be.

My cheeks puff as I exhale, the air buffeting out the dancing flame. The room is temporarily plunged into darkness as my mother claps. My father rises to turn on a lamp.

The cake is too sweet, the thick icing sticking to the roof of my mouth. I grin at my parents, realizing that they have been through thirteen of these parties.

Thirteen cakes to bake. Thirteen songs to sing.

When we finish at the table, we head into the living room. We take our seat on three cushions, which are drowsing on the floor. I sit facing my family. The ritual is so familiar to me now that I could have done it in my sleep. Father dips his finger into a jar of paint, making the tika markings upon my forehead. His strong hands rest upon my shoulders as he bellows out the blessing. Mother's delicate palms touch me next as she says the same words.

"Dan nay bahd. A blessing upon you."

With the ceremony complete, we rise from the ground. I bolt towards the stairs, ready to call Marjorie and gush about the day's events. My mother follows, calling "ah ah, Remy. We have one more birthday surprise for you." Another surprise? I wonder what it could be. Maybe they have bought me a cell phone! Every girl in class has one, except for me, of course. I follow, my curiosity peaked.

They lead me back into the living room and we stand in front of the tapestry that has been hanging on our wall for as long as I can remember.

"Have you ever looked at this tapestry, Remy?"

I nod. The bright colors of the wall hanging used to entrance me as a child. I would sit in front of it for hours, my pigtails swinging as my chubby fingers caressed the glowing cloth.

"This drape has been in our family for generations. Your great-great-grandmother first started weaving it when she was thirteen years old. Since then, every woman in our family has woven her part into it. My Ama kept the tradition, and on my thirteenth birthday I started to put my own life into it, too." Mother strokes the lower quadrant of the tapestry, her eyes alight with unspoken memories. I try to imagine her as a teenager, sitting and braiding those brilliant fibers together.

“This tapestry has a history, a record of generations of ladies proclaiming their womanhood. Now, Remy, it is your turn.”

Suddenly a knot of nerves clenches in my belly. “Mom, I can barely braid my hair. How am I supposed to do this? What if I mess up?” The hanging looms before me, the intricate patterns completed by my ancestors seem particularly beautiful and intimidating. Mother laughs, pulling me into a one-armed hug. “I wish you could have seen me weaving. I lumbered about like a bear, my fingers breaking the threads more times than I dared to count. Yes, it is hard, but it is supposed to be. To intertwine your part into the tapestry is to accept becoming an adult. The life of a woman is never easy, Remy.”

The next few weeks pass quickly and I work on the hanging daily. The strings are as thin as spider webs and I cannot imagine how I will ever finish. At first my fingers are clumsy and my progress slow, but soon my craftsmanship improves. The threads fly through my hands, a willing servant to my ambition. Finally, I have almost met my goal. I sit back on my knees, the carpet digging into my legs; all of these hours of effort, only for a six-inch woven band. My eyes search the tapestry and I can't help but swell with pride when I see the red and gold strands that have made me a woman amidst all of the other women that have come before me. I pull the fragile threads into a knot, my work complete. I recall my birthday wish, and I think that my deepest desire has actually been granted.

After the rape

I stand in front of the full-length mirror, gaping at my nude body. Instinctively, I try to disguise the shameful sight. A gaggle of arms and hands conceal the blossoming body parts I had never noticed before but can no longer ignore. I am Eve, aware of my nakedness for the first time. I lower my arms to my sides, giving myself a clear reflection of the figure that I do not want, the form that is my prison. I stare at the fleshy oranges that are my forming breasts and flinch as I remember Mr. Lortin and how he scraped me out like a fresh fruit. The mirror reflects my face, now twisted in disgust. I collapse into bed, curling into a fetal position.

I am supposed to be asleep. My parents are convinced that I have the flu. I want to tell them what happened. Why can't I tell them? I nibble on one of my fingers. I have already bit my nails to the quick. I never used to bite my nails. I roll over, listening to the squeaky protest of the bed springs. Something has been stolen from me. I sit up, swinging my legs out of bed. The pain in my lower region causes me to cringe and I wonder if I will ever heal. I stand slowly, clinging to the headboard for support. I feel like a toddler learning to walk again. Maybe I am a wounded beast who is taking its last steps.

I descend the steps, overwhelmed by the oppressive silence that surrounds me. Mother and Father are both gone to work and the house is an empty tomb. My feet carry me down the staircase, seeming to have a destination of their own. They lead me into the living room and halt before the tapestry.

I am mesmerized by the richness of it. My fingers stretch towards the brilliant scarlet threads that symbolize my womanhood; it is a stranger to me now. I go to the cabinet, searching through the drawers until I find what I am looking for. The scissors are clunky in my grasp. The tapestry holds the glares of my family's matriarchs. Can they look through time and see me? Surely they know that I am an imposter, that my womanhood is a lie. I gaze at my artwork. It must have been another person who wove those threads together. The scissors latch onto the drape, unrelenting. The delicate pattern that took me so long to create falls to the floor, the strings unraveling like sinews. My eyes cloud with tears as I wonder at the empty spot on the hanging that used to proclaim my life. I am not a woman, I am a corpse. An animal.

My vision swims, but no longer is it just with sorrow. Air burns my throat and I hear the harump, harump of my labored breathing. Everything that ever existed is being compressed into tunnel vision. Something is wrong with my ears. Sounds are muffled as if I am under water.

Why am I on the floor? The coffee table assaults my leg as my body convulses. Something is wrong. I have no control over my body and coherent thoughts flit out of my comprehension.

Am I dying? The idea provides temporary relief. Perhaps if I am a person I can allow myself to slip into the darkness, to rest, but I am an animal and all animals want to survive. I feel my my arms pulling my body across the floor. I reach for the phone, grabbing the curling wire and jerking it down from where it hangs on the wall. My fingers begin pressing buttons. A dial tone grows fainter with every ring. A woman's voice that sounds like it is being echoed up from the bottom of a canyon answers.

"911, what is your emergency?"

My mouth is dry, my tongue cotton as I hyperventilate.

"I think I...need...help..."

It is all I can say before I slip into the abyss.

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Fluorescent lights burn my eyes as I awaken.

Where am I?

Frantically, I assess my surroundings. I try to move my arms but they are restrained. My heart gallops as I suppress a scream. The beeping of machinery pounds in my head. An IV is plugged into my arm, the cool sensation of the saline

fluid pumping through my body is unnerving. A portly woman walks into the room and smiles when she sees me.

“Oh, you're awake!” She wipes her hands on her scrub pants and waddles toward me.

“What happened?” My speech is slurred.

“You had a bit of a panic attack, dear. That was quite brave of you, to call 911 all by yourself. The paramedics brought you to the hospital. We're just running some tests right now. You'll be fine.”

Her voice is slow and peaceful, a false sense of calm.

“We had to sedate you. Your parents are outside, talking to the police.”

“Police? What police?”

The woman's eyes turn wide she has said too much.

“Oh, don't worry. We just found some...um...cause for concern when we gave you a physical examination. We had to follow protocol and contact the authorities.” A volley of fear bombards my mind. Oh God, they know! They know what happened to me! And my parents, they are talking to them right now? What will Mom think? And Dad! No, can't we just keep it a secret? Can't we forget it ever happened?

The heart monitor speeds up and the woman looks concerned.

“There, there. You're okay.”

I see her pull a syringe from her pocket. She inserts the needle into my IV and my eyelids begin to droop.

“No, I want to leave.” My protests are weak.

“You're alright, sweetie. Everything is alright.”

The voice is soothing and I wish I could trust it. Before I know it, I am being cradled in the arms of medicated sleep.

* * *

The days pass by in a blur. When the policemen come, I cannot hold back the truth. I tell them about the attack, everything. I even tell him about the tapestry. He played the part of a shepherd. Our parents trusted him, who wouldn't trust him? But when it came down to it, he was the wolf who was able to herd me like a sheep into a grotto.

I begin to recover, and soon I am released from the hospital. The late night air greets me as I step out of the automatic doors. I walk out of the doctor's care with my chin up, on two legs instead of four. Father opens the car door for me and I sit in the back seat. It is only on the twenty minute ride back home that I realize how exhausted I truly am. The car whirs past manicured lawns as we near our house. Finally the vehicle rumbles to a halt and I take in the pavement stretching before us. I had never noticed how long our driveway is until now. I step inside

the house, the familiar setting welcoming me. I want more than anything to curl in my bed and sleep until all my memories are replaced by dreams, yet there is something I must do. My legs lead me to the spot, the carpet supporting me at this location I have come to know so well. Mother and Father follow close behind, watching.

“Remy, honey...what are you doing?”

I run the shimmering threads of the tapestry through my hands and look back at the people who gave me life. Thirteen years.

I smile, beholding the evidence of many women. Ladies, like me.

“I'm thirteen years old. It's my turn now.”

I gather up the burgundy strings and begin to weave once more.